

Killing vs. Letting Die Thought Experiment

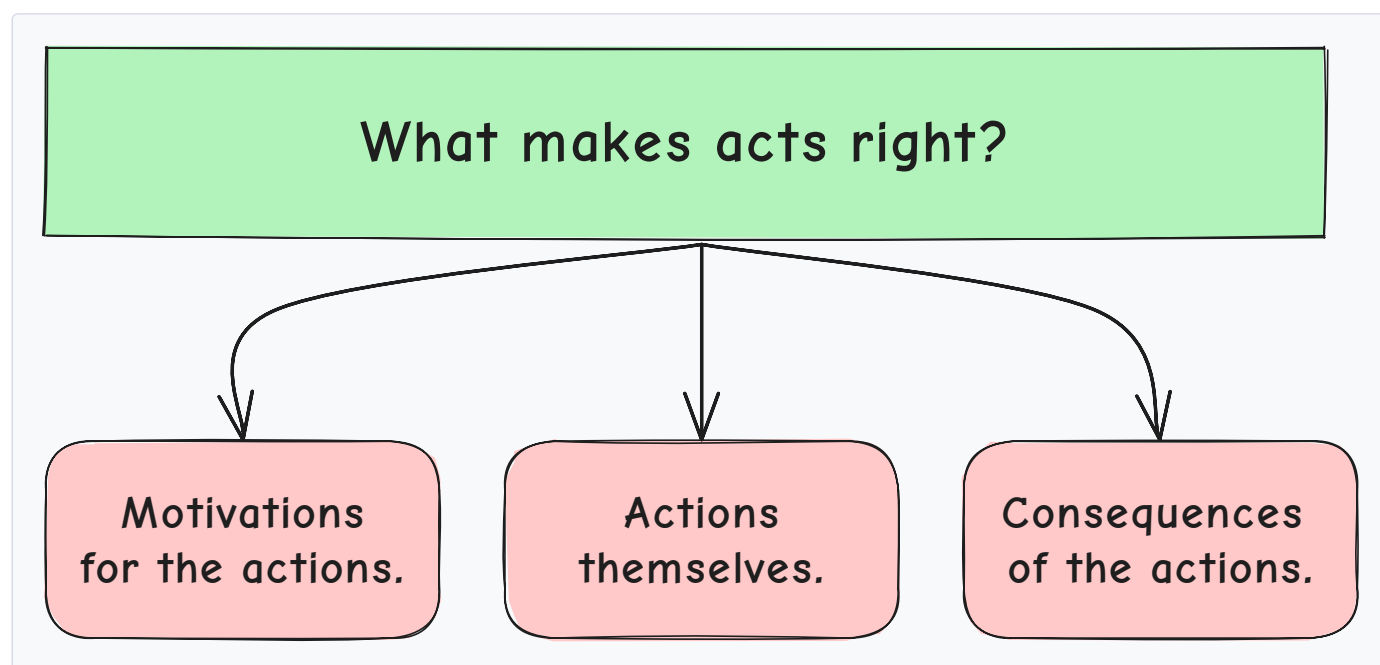
Issue

❓ **Moral Responsibility when one controls the outcome of a situation.**

Is there a major moral difference between “killing” and “letting die”, when all relevant variables are equalized?

Setup

We need to construct a situation that *minimizes* the ethical variables to isolate the issue . First, let's rough-out three components of an ethical situation. For every action, there seems to be the following components:



If this is the case, perhaps constructing a case where the only difference between two situations is the active/passive distinction between killing someone and allowing them to die.

Thought Experiment: The Unfortunate Uncle

Case A

Let's consider a sole heir to a fortune, Tilly, who plots her uncle's demise. She is the only person who lives with him and his butler, albeit on opposite sites of the mansion. Tilly knows Lorca takes a long, hot, and essentially oily bath each Tuesday night while watching basketball in his giant marble bathroom.

Using this information, Tilly waits until he is deep into a bath and slips into the room unnoticed while the crowd goes wild. Sneaking, she strikes, pushing Lorca's shoulders down beneath the waters. After his funeral, she collects her inheritance. We can say that Tilly

- wanted to kill Lorca for the inheritance,
- actively drowned Lorca, and
- end up with Lorca's money and her freedom.

Case B

Now, let's consider a similar case, with Amanda in the place of Tilly. This time, Amanda has snuck up to Lorca's bathroom for three Tuesdays in a row, but can't quite go through with her plans.

However, this time, her luck has struck. As she peers into the room, she sees Lorca slip on the oily marble, crack his head on the side of the tub, and slip beneath the suds. She watches and waits for 15 minutes and slips back to her room. After his funeral, she collects her inheritance. So it seems like we can say that Amanda:

- wanted to kill Lorca for the inheritance,
- actively allowed Lorca to drown, and
- end up with Lorca's money and her freedom.

Moral Analysis

Let's compare the two cases. *Do not* rely on custom or law to reason through this. Remember the is/ought and moral/legal distinctions.

	Motivation	Action	Outcome
Case A: Tilly	Uncle dead for inheritance	Drowned uncle	Uncle dead; money inherited.
Case B: Amanda	Uncle dead for inheritance	Allowed uncle to drown	Uncle dead; money inherited.

❓ Analysis and Implications

1. Is there a meaningful moral difference between what Tilly did and Amanda didn't do?
2. Given that we should reason through like cases alike, does the same moral analysis apply to both cases?
3. How would removing the moral distinction between killing and letting die impact your moral analysis in other cases, such as the [trolley problem and its variants](#)?